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What, am I hearing light? Listening through Jean-Luc Nancy

Martyn Hudson

Hearing is spherical, vision is directional; hearing immerses its subject, vision offers a perspective; sounds come to us, but vision travels to its object; hearing is concerned with interiors, vision is concerned with surfaces; hearing involved physical contact with the outside world, vision requires distance from it; hearing places you inside an event, seeing gives you a perspective on the event; hearing tends towards subjectivity, vision tends towards objectivity; hearing brings us into the living world, sight moves us toward atrophy and death; hearing is about affect, vision is about intellect; hearing is a primarily temporal sense, vision is a primarily spatial sense; hearing is a sense that immerses us in the world, while vision removes us from it - Jonathan Sterne.⁽¹⁾

Tristan calls out to Isolde, as his last breath 'What, am I hearing light?' This breath, as Jean-Luc Nancy has said then, joins all the other of the noises of the world.⁽²⁾ How can Tristan hear what he should be seeing or does he just intimate the perfection of the final sounds he hears in death? What is there, more pointedly, in the work of Jean-Luc Nancy that we can use in thinking about sound and the nature of humanness? Can the multiple, largely unanswered and rhetorical questions that Nancy himself asks elaborate for us a philosophy and sociology of music that evades the terrors of aesthetic analysis in favour of the description of musical and sound practice that is itself divorced from the vulgarities of social determination? This paper's position is not to reassert the centrality of Nancy but to use his ideas on listening to think more about questions of matrices and indices and the utility of these for thinking about sound and identity in critical theory, specifically Marxist conceptions of identity which have an affinity with Nancy's human and social aspirations, by way of Derrida's original reading of Marx.

The idea of contamination and subhumanness and the idea that some forms of music were inherently impure and monstrous were linked by German Fascism in the middle part of the last century by discursive racial doctrines about the womb and the kinds of monsters that could come forth from it. And it is in this idea of the womb or the 'matrice' that Nancy's specific value to an idea of listening can begin to be extrapolated or brought to nativity itself and specifically the stomach where the womb resides.⁽³⁾

Recent commentators on Nancy such as Adrienne Janus and Brian Kane have focused on the translational aspects of his work on listening, to some extent recomposing aspects of Charlotte Mandell's recent translation. I will use both the French and the English text but for ease will refer only to the English translated edition whilst retaining the concepts of *sens* and *corps sonore* from the original rather than the problematic translations as *sens* as meaning and *corps sonore* as sonorous or resonant body – issues that Janus herself has pointed to where using 'meaning' rather than 'sense' means 'silencing its suggestions of sensual perception and movement'.⁽⁴⁾ For Janus the question of sonority is intimately bound to what she calls the 'rhythmical constitution of subjectivity' in Nancy.⁽⁵⁾ The resonant body is an explication in listening terms of the sense of the world, of being and identity which Nancy had previously elaborated in his earlier work on identity and the refutation of the plural/singular dichotomy – a world of 'all existents, those past and those to come, the living and the dead of the objects, fauna, mechanics, of humans themselves – all of which make up the world of being'.⁽⁶⁾ The human subject, the 'listening subject' is an echo chamber in which sound reverberates expressed as *renvoi* and its multiple nuances of feedback, return, boundness and offering. The nuance of language is the central focus of Brian Kane's explication of Nancy. The two forms of listening of *Entendre* and *Écouter*⁽⁷⁾ become for Kane a way in which we can attempt to understand Nancy's mystical formulations. In terms of *renvoi* 'Listening reveals sound as a structure of resonance – an infinite sending and resending. Nancy's analyses also reveal that resonance is the structure of the subject and of sense'.⁽⁸⁾ The distinction between these two forms stress '*Écouter* is selective, positional and indexical' – as a natural attitude of listening (2012:440) and *Entendre* more

rooted in the intentionality of the Husserlian phenomenology and its significations that Nancy wishes to elide or avoid.⁽⁹⁾ In reading Nancy, Kane elaborates the natural listening of the first and the *understanding* and *meaning* of the latter and argues for Nancy's 'allegiance to non-indexical and non-significational modes of listening'.⁽¹⁰⁾ Centrally these means a focus on listening as resonance rather than listening to hear signification – for Kane 'To make listening into something other than listening for signification or indices implies an emphasis on the sensory relationship between world and listener, a listening that begins not with the search for meanings but on the basis of the sensory qualities of sounds'.⁽¹¹⁾ The listening subject, the sonorous body is then a 'subject that is listening to the infinite *renvoi* of meaning, sound, and self'.⁽¹²⁾

Useful as these commentaries are, there are other things to work through and discover in Nancy, specifically the problem of vision, meaning and signification. If the sense of an indice or set of significations is so problematic, what then becomes the basis for subjectivity and identity, and can we think about an alternative vision of identity and subjectivity through ideas of birth and nativity and resonances which are profoundly linked to the birth-blindness of the womb, of the *matrice*? Rather than an index which can be looked up, an inventory which can be assessed, marking each part of the human subject and directly correlating it, can we think of Nancy's work as introducing us to a matrix, no less disciplinary in its way, but sonorous and reverberative rather than signifying and determining?

The sense of sound

The starting-point of critical elaboration is the consciousness of what one really is, and is "knowing thyself" as a product of the historical process to date which has deposited in you an infinity of traces, without leaving an inventory -
Antonio Gramsci⁽¹³⁾

Jean-Luc Nancy's philosophy of listening marks a new direction in thinking about sound but one which is opaque and difficult, in terms of both concept and translation.⁽¹⁴⁾ Henk Oosterling has pointed to the difficulty and density of reading Nancy making a serious survey of his ideas a perilous prospect.⁽¹⁵⁾

Nancy initiates his thinking-through listening (or what amounts to listening supplanting thinking-through) by contrasting philosophical practice with listening and questions whether that practice can truly listen rather than understand. In order to grasp this we have to see philosophy as a way of looking for meaning and signification, to locate something one hears in an index, to situate, to provide context.⁽¹⁶⁾ This means that in reality we evade listening in order to look for something else – that which listening signifies – a philosopher might be trying to locate a concept that she will find through hearing a sound or a piece of music, a historian might be listening for a rendition of crusader chants in early music ensemble performances, a geographer may listen to Delius in order to hear the signification of landscape. The project of deconstruction, of which Nancy has played no little part, has problematized, if not severed those relationships of signification, displacing the visual motifs of sight and clarity with opaqueness and instability.⁽¹⁷⁾ As Nancy says 'Is listening something of which philosophy is capable? Or – we'll insist a little, despite everything, at the risk of exaggerating the point – hasn't philosophy superimposed upon listening, beforehand and of necessity, or else substituted for listening, something else that might be more on the order of *understanding*'.⁽¹⁸⁾ For Nancy the practice of philosophy has to hear (and hinting at totality, 'hears everything'), but to practice philosophy has to neutralize, as part of that practice the very practice of listening rather than understanding.⁽¹⁹⁾

Listening, or sonority, eclipses and outweighs vision and visual description. It becomes more than the *form* - 'It does not dissolve it, but rather enlarges it; it gives an amplitude, a density, and a vibration or an undulation whose outline does anything but approach. The visual persists until its disappearance; the sonorous appears and fades away into its permanence'.⁽²⁰⁾ Acoustic penetration and resonance do not come from far away and disappear into its horizon as a visual object does – the 'withdrawals', turning inwards, solipsisms of sound are profoundly different processes to the objects of visibility, its referents and its indices - 'Why and how is it that something of perceived meaning has privileged a model, a support, or a referent in visual presence rather than in acoustic penetration?'⁽²¹⁾ This inwardness and withdrawal is a process of sonorous resonance in the very being and materiality of the *corps sonore* whereas visualisation the opposite is true – rather than inward resonance the eye conjures up the images, makes manifest, displays – 'a making *evident*' (2007:3). Nancy privileges the body of the listening subject against the rational, seeing determining and signifying intellect. It is that internality and inwardness that we will return to in a moment, but what is the knowledge that the resonance of sound brings to us in its wave? How, for Nancy, is meaning engendered, modulated, determined or dispersed in the process of listening where

knowledge arises not in intellectual capacity or the search for the signified listening but in accent, tone, timbre, resonance and sound?(22) The evocation of form, or a sonorous vision, can be possible through listening and its signification, but can we visualize sound and resonance itself?(23)

This then problematizes the question of truth and the truth of listening and the kinds of resonances and echoes that inhabit the human subject and to its inwardnesses.

Shouldn't truth "itself," as transitivity and incessant tradition of a continual coming and going, be listened to rather than seen? But isn't it also in the way that it stops being "itself" and identifiable, and becomes no longer the naked figure emerging from the cistern but the resonance of that cistern – or, if it were possible to express it thus, the echo of the naked figure in the open depths?(24)

Replacing the naked figure of truth with echo and resonance of the cistern displaces the forms of knowledge of visibility. We do not perceive the figure but bear the resonance of the sound in our own inwardness. This does not mean that listening does not disclose truths and secrets and neither does it eliminate social identifications and social being, the plural of the singular:

What secret is at stake when one truly *listens*, that is, when one tries to capture or surprise the sonority rather than the message? What secret is yielded – hence also made public – when we listen to a voice, an instrument, or a sound just for itself? And the other, indissociable aspect will be: What does *to be* listening, *to be* all ears, as one would say "to be in the world," mean?<(25)

We will return to those secrets of inwardness momentarily but the excision of the forms of truth becomes, for Nancy, of some importance. *Entendre*, *hearing* becomes a hearing of sense and signification. To hear a sound (siren, bird, drum) is to begin to understand a wider world beyond that sound. Even if we do not understand the text or utterance fully itself, it begins to provide a wider context to that hearing, ones that lies beyond the sound itself, a meaning that is not directly accessible through the sound or is somehow distant but connected with it.(26) The constant referral to something else is meaning. The constant referrals of sound however may not necessarily infer and defer meaning, it spreads in space at the same time as resounding 'in me' - in those inward spaces, inside of the human form.(27) Here meaning is not inferred or deferred we just have the presence of sound resounding through the body making the body itself a resonance chamber, an acoustic space which receives and refracts the sounds emanating through it. If the self is the constitution of multiple referrals and identities, the resonating subject is as much a product of the echoes of sound without signification as it is of meaning. The intelligibility of the self then means an understanding of these multiple referrals and resonances.(28) This becomes both a referral to indices and an understanding of what Nancy means by matrices, or what we can understand from Nancy to take this concept further.

Echo chambers

The creation of a 'global sonorous space' of music(29) means the ubiquity of sound and resonance. Unlike visual spatialities the spatiality of music is encompassing - 'To listen is to enter that spatiality by which, *at the same time*, I am penetrated, for it opens up in me as well as around me, and from me as well as toward me: it opens me inside me as well as outside'.(30) The reverberation chamber of the body(31) is one which echoes beyond meaning.(32) The bringing of humans into the world is at once a birth of subjectivity but also of a subjectivity into sound worlds;

Perhaps we should thus understand the child who is born with his first cry as himself being – his being or his subjectivity – the sudden expansion of an echo chamber, a vault where what tears him away and what summons him resound at once, setting in vibration a column of air, of flesh, which sounds at its apertures: body and soul of some *one* unique. Someone who comes to himself by hearing himself cry (answering the other? calling him?), or sing, always

each time, beneath each word, crying or singing, *exclaiming* as he did by coming into the world.⁽³³⁾

Not only is the human birthed into the sound world but sonority itself is constitutive of the human subject 'a friction, the pinch or grate of something produced in the throat, a borborygmus, a crackle, a stridency where a weighty, murmuring matter breathes, opened into the division of its resonance. Once again, the birthing cry, the birth of the cry – call or complaint, song, rustling of self, until the last murmur'.⁽³⁴⁾ The sound of the new human itself becomes enmeshed with the sound of the world – the sounds of other humans but also, importantly, with the sounds of objects, mechanics, the inanimate, flora, fauna, all of the living and the dead or as Marx says 'all the tradition of all the dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brain of the living'.⁽³⁵⁾

The emergence of the human from the stomach, the stomach in which we feel resonance, a stomach stretched like a drum, a 'sonorous cavity' in which the soul resides becomes for Nancy the constitutive moment of identity formation through sound.⁽³⁶⁾ The womb/matrice is the beginning of sound, where we feel sound, the origin of identity, the origin of difference, an instrument of sound production and sound reception, a border and a passage between singularity and plurality, the space where we begin listening;

The womb [*matrice*]-like constitution of resonance, and the resonant constitution of the womb: What is the belly of a pregnant woman, if not the space or the antrum where a new instrument comes to resound, a new *organon*, which comes to fold in on itself, then to move, receiving from outside only sounds, which, when the day comes, it will begin to echo through its cry? But, more generally, more womblike, it is always in the belly that we – man or woman – end up listening. or start listening. The ear opens into the sonorous cave that we then become'.⁽³⁷⁾

The matrice is also fundamentally somewhere where we listen without signification, where the sound is received but not a sound indicative of referral, deferral, or meanings not present. But this does not mean that it is not disciplinary or that the multiplicity of our identities somehow avoid the subjective and objective makings of our human psychic form. When Marx called the human 'the ensemble of social relations'⁽³⁸⁾ he did not mean the conscious adoption of the human cultural and psychic form by new human but the ways in which totality invested itself into the form of the human surreptitiously and without consent and the ways in which identities were formed by the process of history. If one were to try to uncover those social relations constitutive of the human, which as Gramsci has said has left no inventory, then the search for *meaning* and *signification* is in itself already lost. There are no indices, or if there are, they are fragmented and dispersed with no order, no form other than as remnants of the historical process, or if talking about sound, the dispersed tatters of sounds which have presented themselves to us as we try to make sense of what they might signify and mean. Reworking Nancy's poetic and opaque notion of the womb/matrice hints at something that is central but hidden to the human listening subject – that the sounds which resonate through us, invest us just as much as the forces of history, and the ubiquity of that sound world, that *noise*, annihilates any sense of uncovering meaning.

Anticipations

Todd May⁽³⁹⁾ has presented an outstanding political analysis of deconstruction and the concept of identity and community in Nancy's work and in doing so has stressed the nature of exposure and closure on the formation of the individual subject and the ways in which the outside impacts upon the inside of the subject. In what sense then can sound, as we turn away from signification and indices, provide some insight into the very birth of the human form, the matrices that act as the nativity for human subjectivities? What kinds of inwardnesses are created by the resonance of sound for the listening *corps sonore*? If we can offer the following emerging themes from our analysis of Nancy it may go some way towards demystifying or making less opaque his listening in order to enhance new ways of thinking about sound.

Firstly, Nancy's reworking of listening disparages the privilege of both hearing as understanding and the totalizing will of sight. The displacement of vision in recent phenomenological and poststructuralist thought has not in any serious way led to the emergence of new ways of thinking about sound philosophically except perhaps in the recent work of Salome Voegelin. For Voegelin the constitution of the subject is formed in complicity with the materiality of sound and is 'complicit with its production'.⁽⁴⁰⁾ The subject position of the self is enwrapped by the materiality of sound and a

sense of the world with it is implicitly bound to hearing, whereas in sight there is always distance and removal.⁽⁴¹⁾ The simultaneity of self with sound stresses this complicity against detachment in the practice of listening. ⁽⁴²⁾ In listening, knowledge and experience liberates itself from vision. The co-production of sound makes the subject complicit with and constituted by that sound world.⁽⁴³⁾ Like Nancy, Voegelin listens to that 'ephemeral complexity of sound that avoids classification and focuses on being heard rather than on being understood'.⁽⁴⁴⁾

Secondly, Nancy's work raises significant questions about the nature of sound and its relationship to knowledge. As sound resonates through us and we are tempted to either understand its signification or to accept the resonance through the echo chambers of the subject in which that very proximity of the soundwave problematizes our being in the world and what that sound is doing to us. As Brandon La Belle has noted;

Sound is already always mine and not mine – I cannot hold it for long, nor can I arrest all its itinerant energy. Sound is promiscuous. It exists as a network that teaches us how to belong, to find place, as well as how not to belong, to drift. To be out of place, and still to search for new connection, for proximity. Auditory knowledge is non-dualistic. It is based on empathy and divergence, allowing for careful understanding and deep involvement in the present while connecting to the dynamics of mediation, displacement, and virtuality.⁽⁴⁵⁾

Even if we, as Nancy does, reject the project of auditory knowledge, there is still an imperative to understand knowledge in another way: to understand not music-as-knowledge but the process by which resonance achieves its route through us and what happens inside us. Nancy speculates philosophically about the stomach, sound, and modes of resonant but his work also offers us ways of thinking about descriptions of the impact of sound on inwardness.

Thirdly, the whole notion of inwardness, of windowlessness, of the relationship of the inside of the human to outside 'being-in-the-world' is a constitutive project of philosophy itself, if not the centrality of its whole practice. If the inside could be read off against a set of indices which directly match and correlate out there in the world with in here in my being, then that form of inventory would provide a solution to the whole nature of the human as simply a product, 'an ensemble of social relations'. But the species-being, the biological nature of the human would have to be bracketed as something we would have to be silent about. Not only does Nancy postulate some significant ways of thinking about sense and being, he also raises questions about the nature of sound and its impact on the human which transcends the time and space of a contemporaneous humanity and its immediate ensemble. In actuality, his discussion of Titian and the resonating power of the stomach stresses the universality, spatially and temporally, of our mode of being and its sounds – the reception of sound is trans-historical. More than this, Nancy's awareness of modes of listening not only point to the constitutive role of sound in the production of the human, but also to the role of sound in the construction of the world – the noise of the world is the first thing that the human uses to locate its nature and its place. Sound is of the essence of human subjectivity, before vision, in the womb, the 'sonorous cave' in which the human becomes open and conscious to the world.

Fourthly, the noise of the world is not just a human noise, it is the noise of all existents, the human and non-human, the living and the dead, the song sung and the record, the inanimate object and the sound of the sea and the weather. The unmediated reception of resonance of this in the echo chamber of the body and in the matrice that gives it its nativity means that the unsigned complexity of the sound world is unmappable but culpable for everything that that human subject will become. There is no such thing as a pure sound. The immersion in sound is various and polymorphous. When Tristan hears the light as he is dying, he does not ask what it means, or where it comes from, he just receives the sound as we receive light. We revel in it, it gives us life. It also means that any attempt to reassert the purity of a doctrinal sound designed to ward against pollution and contamination will always fail. The attempt by German fascism to purify culture, including its Tristans, of its contaminants can only fail because of the perversity and the encompass of world sound. We are born monsters, from the matrice we emerge as contaminated beings, into light and light we will become.

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- (3) ^ Ibid, 51-53.
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- (8) ^ Ibid.
- (9) ^ Ibid, 440-441.
- (10) ^ Ibid, 442.
- (11) ^ Ibid, 443.
- (12) ^ Ibid, 446
- (13) ^ Gramsci, Antonio. *Selections from the Prison Notebooks* trans. Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith, (London:Lawrence and Wishart, 1971), 324.
- (14) ^ Mandell in her translators notes entendre means both to understand and hear. Matrice means both womb and matrix. Renvoi means return, send back, repeat. Sens means meaning and sense as in the senses.
- (15) ^ Henk Oosterling 'From Interests to "Inter-esse:" Jean-Luc Nancy on Deglobalization and Sovereignty' *SubStance* 34:1, No. 106, (2005), 81-103, 82.
- (16) ^ Nancy, Jean-Luc. 2007, op.cit., 1.
- (17) ^ There is little intention in this paper to assess this although I have critiqued the same project and its dissolution of truth elsewhere (Hudson, see below).
- (18) ^ Nancy, Jean-Luc. 2007, op.cit., 1.
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